

The Reunification of the Gladstone Papers in London and Hawarden

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WHEN HE DIED IN 1898, WILLIAM E. GLADSTONE—the “Grand Old Man” of nineteenth-century British politics—left behind what was arguably his greatest legacy: an extensive collection of books and papers, which he intended to house in a library that would be freely available to the people whom he had served for most of his adult life. In 1889 Gladstone began transporting his thousands of books in a wheel-barrow from his Castle in Hawarden, Wales, to this new location. It was opened in 1902 as The National Memorial to W. E. Gladstone and renamed St. Deiniol’s Library in 1906. On 14 December 1929, the trustees of the Gladstone Family Trust and the British Museum entered into an agreement to “arrange, catalog, and bind the papers.”¹ The individual responsible for undertaking this task was the Gladstone family archivist, Arthur Tilney Bassett (1869–1964).² The previous August,

¹ *British Museum Catalogue of Additions to the Manuscripts: the Gladstone Papers Additional Manuscripts 44086-44835* (London: Trustees of the British Museum, 1953), v.

² Bassett’s entry in *Who Was Who* (2nd ed., vol. 6, 1961–70 [London: Adam and Charles Black, 1979] 66) lists him as O.B.E., Chevalier Ordre de Léopold [Belgium] and as the secretary to the Gladstone Trustees from 1907–14. During WWI, he worked variously on the War Refugees Committee (1915–19), in the Royal Navy Volunteer Reserves, and as secretary to the British Committee of the Russian Red Cross (1919–20). He was secretary to Herbert Asquith during the 1922 election. His “recreations” are listed as “billiards and chess,” and he was a member of the Athenæum Club.

Bassett revealed his plans to divide the Gladstone Papers in a confidential report to the trustees of St. Deiniol's:

The particulars of letters from and to members of the family are given in the indices. I see no very valid reason for the retention of any of them except that those from some members of the family may not be of sufficient importance to warrant preservation at the British Museum, whilst on the other hand, there are correspondences of great value. The latter are those of chiefly an older generation and it might be considered whether these, i.e. from and to Mr. G's father, brothers, sisters, and Mrs. Gladstone might not be sent to the British Museum and those of a later generation retained.³

Bassett completed the bulk of this work by 1935. A. Jeffries Collins, Keeper of Manuscripts at the British Library at the time, noted that in re-arranging the collection, Bassett "rejected and returned to Hawarden some 50,000 documents which he judged unsuitable for retention, as was permitted by the original agreement."⁴ As a result, the Gladstone Papers were destined to exist in two different locations, and in very different circumstances. At the British Library, the Gladstone Papers were bound and cataloged, and have been used extensively by scholars ever since. Meanwhile, the collection at Hawarden remains partially uncataloged, unbound, and largely ignored by all but a few intrepid inquirers.

Since 2012, the Victorian Lives and Letters Consortium (VLLC) has been working with Gladstone's Library and the British Library in order to reunite the original Gladstone archive in a virtual re-creation of Gladstone's intended organization of his papers. In 2014, VLLC co-founder and director Brent E. Kinser traveled to Hawarden to assist with the installation of a scanner and the application of metadata procedures to insure that the digitization of the Gladstone collection at Hawarden could begin smoothly and uniformly. Later that summer, Louisa Yates, Director of Collections and Research at Gladstone's Library, traveled to London to meet with Arnold Hunt, then

³ [Arthur Tilney Bassett], "Report on the Gladstone Papers in the Muniment Room, Hawarden," typescript, August 1929, uncataloged St. Deiniol's MSS [now held at Gladstone's Library], 8.

⁴ *British Museum Catalogue of Additions to the Manuscripts v.*

curator of Modern Manuscripts at the British Library, in order to discuss the Gladstone reunification project. As they toured the Gladstone collection in the stacks of the BL, Hunt and Yates discovered a slim volume that was unknown either to them or to previous researchers. The volume, erroneously shelved in the papers of Gladstone's daughter Mary, was an index written by Gladstone that clearly outlined his plans for the arrangement of his papers.

The notebook offers a fascinating glimpse into Gladstone's organizational principles. The majority of the entries represents an alphabetical arrangement of letters sent to him. Of particular interest are the chronological, thematic categories he began to arrange (see below, 249). It is impossible to know what letters constituted these groupings, or at which library they now reside. To be sure, with the last dated theme of "1853-4," there are nearly a half-century of possible themes unrealized. Some of the correspondents listed in the book are in London, and others are in Hawarden. Ultimately, the notebook clearly confirms that Gladstone never conceived of his papers being separated. In a turn of events that might appeal to the inveterate modernizer, this document will serve as an organizational guide for the construction of the Gladstone Archives Online, one of the four founding sites of the VLLC. For the first time, members of the general public, students, researchers, and scholars will have access to the complete Gladstone archive in one of the virtual rooms comprising the VLLC mansion. The "Grand Old Man" would surely have savored the rebirth of his original scheme to build a library of his papers for the people.

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